

The Bach Chaconne Starter Kit

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So what is a chaconne, anyway?

A chaconne is a set of melodic variations that occurs over a repeating chord progression. There are several famous examples of pieces that are chaconnes (even if they are not actually called that). You may know the Pachelbel Canon, which is a 3-part canon built on top of a chaconne. It's one of the most famous pieces of classical music, and there are lots of performances of it on You Tube you can listen to; here's a nice one by the London Symphony Orchestra:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Af372EQLck>

In the world of classic rock, there's a well-known tune by Ray Charles called "Hit the Road, Jack" that repeats the same four chords (A minor, G, Major, F Major, and E Major) over and over again. In case you don't know it, you can hear it at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q8Tiz6INF7I>

The chaconne is not just a piece of instrumental music, but is also a Baroque courtly dance! It was usually performed as a stately procession to enter or exit a ballroom. In the French court of Versailles, you probably would have entered the grand salon to greet King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette to the strains of a chaconne.

Bach's Chaconne in D Minor

Bach wrote a famous chaconne—the Mother of all chaconnes—as the final movement of his Partita in D minor for solo violin. No one would be able to dance to this one! In performance, it usually lasts over 14 minutes! Violinist Joshua Bell said this about the chaconne: "it is not just one of the greatest pieces of music ever written, but one of the greatest achievements of any man in history. It's a spiritually powerful piece, emotionally powerful, structurally perfect." Some music historians and performers believe that it is actually a sacred work because of hidden references to the Passion story. There are many performances of it on You Tube; here's a good one by Bella Hristova, a student at the Curtis Institute of Music:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkfsGClIHb4>

As you listen to it, you can hear the violinist playing an unbroken succession of melodic variations that follow the chord progression laid out in the first nine bars.

Here's the chord progression of the Bach chaconne:



Now, some of you may have had a little music theory already in school or perhaps as part of your private lessons. Some of you may actually enjoy music theory; others of you may not know much about it yet, and possibly a few of you may hate it and wish it would go away. For those of you in the second or third group, the good news is that *you don't have to know any music theory* in order to write excellent variations on the chaconne chord progression.

But just for you music theory fans, I've reprinted the chaconne progression below with a Roman numeral analysis and lead sheet notation. But again, it's not necessary to understand the symbols above and below the staff in order to create a successful variation.

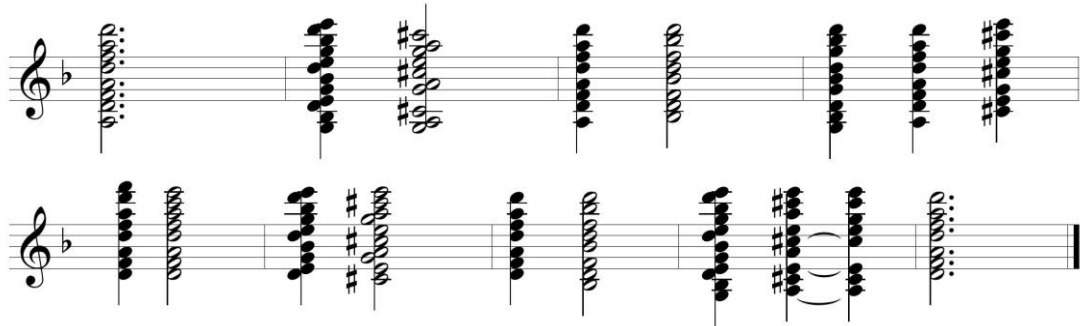
The image shows the chord progression of the Bach chaconne with Roman numeral analysis and lead sheet notation. The notation is as follows:

- Bar 1: Dm (d: i)
- Bar 2: Edim7/D (iiø4/2)
- Bar 3: A7/C# (V6/5)
- Bar 4: Dm (i)
- Bar 5: Bb (VI)
- Bar 6: Gm (iv)
- Bar 7: Dm/A (i 6/4)
- Bar 8: C#dim (viiø)
- Bar 9: Dm (i)
- Bar 10: Edim7/D (iiø4/2)
- Bar 11: A7/C# (V6/5)
- Bar 12: Dm (Dm)

So how do you go about writing your own variations above this chord progression?

There are several different ways. We'll try one way that we can call "connect the dots" (except in this case, the dots are actually notes.)

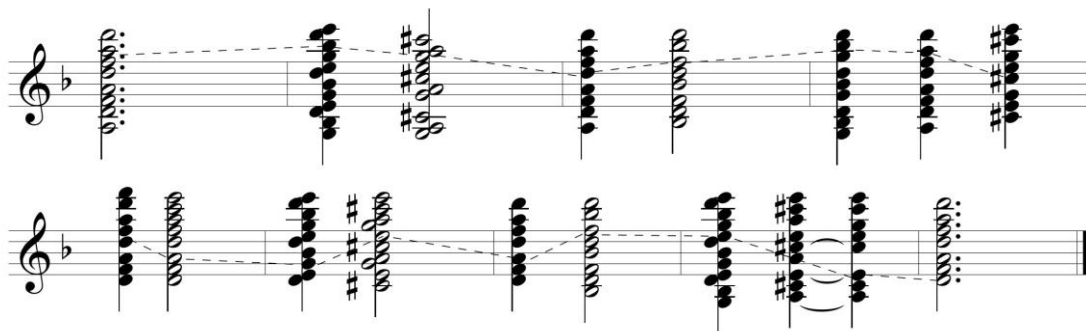
Let's look at the chord progression again. If we consider the same chords but now put the notes in many registers, it would look like this:



(Depending on your instrument, you might not be able to play all those notes, or possibly you might be able to play notes that are even higher or lower than the ones shown.)

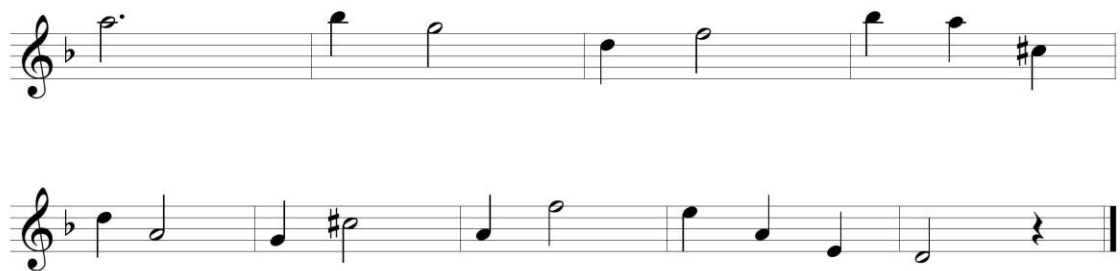
Step one

Now, we're going to connect the dots by drawing a line connecting one note in one chord to any other note in the next chord. Obviously, there are countless possibilities, depending on whether you draw your lines up, down, or straight across. Here's an example, in which I use a dotted line to connect my notes, which I selected somewhat randomly:



Step two

Next, I've taken the notes that I connected with the lines and put them on a staff by themselves. You can do this with your own notes using manuscript paper or a music software program. Here are my notes:



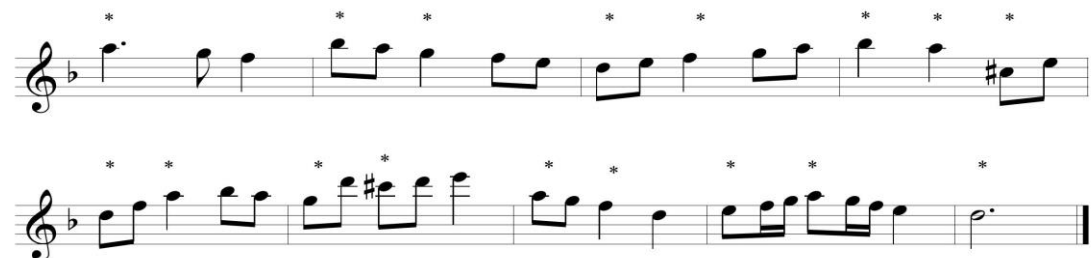
This by itself would sound a little weird—kind of leap-y and not very tuneful. But now comes the fun (and most challenging) part.

Step three

I can now create a melody by filling in the space between my notes with other notes of various rhythms. This means, in most cases, changing the original note values to shorter notes. There are, of course, an endless number of possibilities. You can use any combination of 16ths, 8ths, quarters, etc., and move by step, by leap, or by a combination of steps and leaps. Here's an example, based on the notes above. You'll notice that my original pitches are in their original positions in the measure (though in most cases I've changed their rhythmic values to shorter notes). I've marked them with an asterisk, so they're easy to see.



Here's another example, based on the same asterisk notes. In this one, I use fewer 16th notes, and I also take some of my asterisk notes up an octave so that the melodic line goes higher.



Obviously, there are an infinite number of possibilities, and some will sound better than others. Remember, the “connect the dots” method is only meant to be a guide—a way to start. There is no rule that says you have to stick with it throughout your melody, or even use it at all. You could use it as a rough guide from which you can depart at any point.

As you begin to experiment with your melody (and this will take some trial and error), keep in mind that there are certain conventions that Bach and other Baroque composers followed to make their music sound good:

- Most of the “filler” notes should fit into the chords. Notes that do not fit are called “non-chord tones” and they usually occur on weak beats (2 and 3), weak parts of beats (the “and” of the beat, as in 1-and, 2-and, 3-and), and notes of short duration. Certainly, it is possible to have non-chord tones on strong beats and parts of beats, such as suspensions, and these can sound very beautiful. But they need to be used with care, and rather sparingly.
- Melodies usually have a single high point. In the examples above, the highest notes (C in the first example and E in the second) occur only once.
- The 7th scale degree (C# in our key of D minor) usually moves to the first scale degree (D), either immediately or within a beat.
- Melodies often have repeating rhythmic patterns to give a sense of cohesiveness. In the examples above, the eighth-and-two-sixteenths figure occurs eight times in the first example and twice in the second. And in the second example, the pattern of two eighth—quarter—two eighths within one measure occurs three times. We call these patterns “unifying devices,” because they help to unify the melody.
- Your melody should be fairly easy to perform. After all, you’ll be playing it, so you’ll want to make sure it fits within the range of your instrument and stays within your comfort zone as a performer. Of course, if you want to write some really challenging lines that will push your limits as a performer, then go right ahead! There is certainly a long tradition of composers writing virtuosic variations for themselves as a means of featuring their own prodigious performing skills.

Of course, you can also try writing melodies without using the “connect the dots” method, simply by listening to the chord progression (or playing it on the piano if you can) and then just freely inventing a melody to go along with it. Whatever method you use, you will still want to adhere to the bullet points above.

So, that’s the Bach Chaconne Starter Kit! Have fun, and good luck with your chaconne variations!